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April 21, 2015

Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee Public Hearing

Bill #1137, *An Act Concerning the Connecticut Competitiveness Council*

To the members of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee,

My name is Yolanda Alicea-Lopez, and I live in Hamden. I've been working as a home care worker (PCA) for the elderly, a state-funded program, since 1999.

Bill #1137, *An Act Concerning the Connecticut Competitiveness Council*, would create a new group to - quote - "outline the primary challenges to Connecticut's economic competitiveness and policy responses required to meet those challenges." I already have an idea on what you can do to help Connecticut be more competitive that I would like to share with you.

I love to care for the elderly because I like helping others. I've cared for my current client, who I call "Mama," for six years, and she is like family to me. Without me, Mama's entire family would have to quit their jobs to keep her at home. She is bedridden and relies on me to do everything - I give her medication and feed her through her G-tube (gastrostomy tube that feeds directly into her stomach). I turn her and use a mechanical lift to lift her on my own. It's a big responsibility but it makes me feel good to know I am making a difference in another person's life.

However, because I am paid only \$13/hour and can only work 25 hours per week due to state statute, I only bring home \$1046 per month. My rent is \$850/month, so that leaves me less than \$200/month to cover my bills, my food, my transportation, and medication for my diabetes and asthma. Because I am a diabetic, I have a special diet I need to follow, but I don't make enough money to buy the foods on the list. However, the state says I make too much money to qualify for food stamps. Many times, I find myself going to the food pantry just to survive.

Even so, I can't always make ends meet. A few months ago, I got evicted because I couldn't keep up on my rent, and I lost everything - whatever I couldn't sell, I had to give away. I lost all of my memories of my life with my

husband, who passed away 5 years ago. All I could keep were my clothes and the pictures of our life together.

Getting sick or hurt can also be a disaster. Luckily, I am on Medicaid. However, a couple of weeks ago, I had a tumor on my back and I needed to have surgery to remove it. Because I had sold everything, I was sleeping on the floor, and only finally managed to get an air mattress after the surgery. But I couldn't even afford to take any time off work – I went back to work the next day, stitches and all, because if I miss a day of work, I can't pay my rent and I'll get evicted again.

In addition to not being able to afford to take a day off when I'm sick, I obviously can't afford to take a vacation. The last vacation I had was in 2003 when my husband was alive.

It's not fair that we have to live like this. We care for the most vulnerable people who can't care for themselves, but we deserve to be able to take care of ourselves and our families, too.

Being paid such a low wage by the state hurts me, and also hurts area businesses – my landlord, the supermarket, and other stores I would shop at if I had any money left in my paycheck. Being paid such low wages also means I have no choice but to burden the state's Medicaid. How does this make economic sense? How does this make Connecticut an attractive or competitive place? It doesn't.

Please help us get the life – and the state -- that we deserve. Please raise more revenue that the state needs to pay caregivers like me a fair wage. We will reinvest those dollars immediately and directly into local businesses in our communities, and that will make Connecticut competitive.

Sincerely.

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